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ABSTRACT

As the problems of book theft and mutilation of library materials were growing, a survey was conducted by the Periodicals and Reference Departments at the University of Memphis Library (Tennessee) in the spring of 1994. An 11-item questionnaire was distributed to 73 students. Students' attitudes toward the problems, their causes, and means to prevent future occurrence were examined. The findings and implications of the survey are discussed. Three tables of the findings are presented, and the questionnaire and students' comments are appended. (Contains 6 references.) (Author/JLB)

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Book Theft and Mutilation of Library Materials: A Case Study

ED 373 785

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ABSTRACT

As the problems of book theft and mutilation of library materials are growing, a survey was conducted by the Periodicals and Reference Departments at the University of Memphis Library in the spring of 1994. An 11-item questionnaire was distributed to 73 students. Students' attitudes toward the problems, their causes, and means to prevent future occurrence were examined were examined. The findings and implications of the survey are discussed. Three tables of the findings are presented and two appendixes of the questionnaire and students' comments are included.

LITERATURE OVERVIEW

The issues of book theft and mutilation of library materials have been addressed sparingly in the library literature. In the late 1970s,[1] the main consideration for collection security was whether to install electronic book detection systems. Even though more and more libraries have decided to install these detection systems, the problems of book theft and mutilation of library materials remain. These detection systems may stop forgetful and unskilled users, but they do not offer protection against intentional damage and theft of library materials. During the last few years, the problems have been growing more serious;[2] bringing much more attention and concern from various libraries, including academic, special, and public ones.

Perusing the literature reveals that the general public, students, researchers, scholars and even library staff are the potential and actual groups who commit the crime.[3] Items that are most often stolen or mutilated include periodicals, rare manuscripts, and books. Various motives for the crime have been discussed, including socio-economic stresses, academic pressure among students, low-risk attitude among patrons, negative attitudes among patrons toward the libraries, and so on.[4]

Previous studies have blamed the people who committed the crime for their selfishness and dishonesty. The society was blamed for being too materialistic, making it hard to resist temptation. Moreover, it is not unusual to find that librarians were also blamed for being innocent, ignorant, or complacent. Often, the

trust between librarians and patrons was considered a real victim.[5] Hence, it is apparent from the literature that librarians, patrons and the society all share the responsibility for the crime.

UNIVERSITY OF MEMPHIS LIBRARY

At the University of Memphis Library (UML), much concern has been given to the problems of book theft and mutilation of library materials. It is not infrequent to find that periodical articles are ripped off, or that even the entire issue is missing; and pages of reference books and indexes are torn off. As a result, both the Reference and the Periodicals Departments have to put some heavily demanded books, current issues of magazines, and newspapers behind their information desks. When patrons need them, they need to go to the desks to sign a request slip for use.

PURPOSES OF THE STUDY

Since the problems of book theft and mutilation of library materials impose tremendous hardships on the public services and the administration, in the spring of 1994, a study of the problems was carried out at the Library. The purposes of the study are: (1) to explore students' attitudes toward the problems; (2) to identify the underlying reasons of book theft and mutilation of library materials among students; and (3) to delineate potential solutions to the problems.

METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire of 11 questions was designed to elucidate user demographics, students' attitude toward the problems, the reasons for the problems, and suggestions to remedy the problems.[6] The questions were structured by using a combination of closed- and open-ended responses as well as using a 5-point scale Likert-type statements. Appendix I is a copy of the questionnaire and Appendix II is a collection of students' comments toward the problems. The participants were assured of anonymity in order to elicit candid responses. Seventy-three copies of the questionnaire were distributed and collected in the Periodicals and Reference Departments during the last two weeks in April, when the final examinations were approaching and more students went to the library to study. They were asked if they would respond to the survey. Only those who agreed were given the questionnaire. Responses were collected at about 15 minutes after the respondents were given the questionnaire. The SAS statistical package was used to tabulate the data collected from the survey. The following is a summary of the findings.

FINDINGS

Demographics:

Of the 73 responses, 55 (75.3%) responses were from undergraduate students: freshman (7; 9.6%), sophomore (15; 20.5%), junior (12; 16.4%), and senior (21; 28.8%). The other 18 (24.7%) responses were from graduate students. (See Table 1) Thirty-two (43.8%) of the respondents are male and 41 (56.2%) are female.

Attitude Toward Mutilation and Theft of Library Materials:

Fifty-nine (80.8%) respondents reported that missing or mutilated library materials had inconvenienced or frustrated them: 35 (47.9%) indicated occasionally, 15 (20.5%) indicated often, and 9 (12.3%) indicated very frequently. Only 14 (19.2%) respondents reported that they were not bothered.

If they saw someone mutilating or stealing library materials, 48 (65.8%) of them would take some action: 14 (19.2%) would ask them to stop and 34 (46.6%) would report it to library personnel. However, 25 (34.2%) of them would do nothing.

When asked if they had ever thought about tearing out an article or stealing a library book or magazine, 51 (69.9%) reported never, but 10 (13.7%) reported occasionally, 11 (15.1%) reported often, and only 1 (1.4%) reported often. In a related question, the majority (66; 90.4%) of them did realize that they and many others had to use the same materials; only 7 (9.6%) of them did not.

Regarding the ease of tearing out an article or stealing a book or magazine without being caught, 53 (72.6%) respondents indicated that it was easy to do so; 17 (23.3) indicated somewhat difficult, and only 3 (4.1%) indicated very difficult.

For those caught mutilating or stealing library materials, most of them (71; 97.3%) favored some form of penalty: 32 (43.8%) favored fine, 36 (49.3%) favored more severe penalty, and 3 (4.1%) favored fine and more severe penalty. Only 2 (2.7%) indicated that there should not be any penalty.

Reasons for Mutilation and Theft of Library Materials:

Out of the 13 suggested reasons, the most relevant reason for mutilating and theft of library materials was that library materials could not be checked out (69.9%). The other prevalent reasons were: the belief that penalties would be lenient if they were caught (67.1%); the library's security measures were inadequate (61.7%); users were not aware of replacement costs (57%). The lesser prevalent reasons included: users did not believe that it was a crime or immoral to mutilate library materials (49.4%); it was conceived as much easier to take away library materials than to photocopy (42.5%) them; there were not enough copies of frequently used materials (40.3%) available; users wanted to prevent others from having access to the information (34.3%); users did not have time to make photocopies (23.3%); the qualities of copies were not good enough for reproducing photographs, color charts, and so on (22.3%); the photocopy machines were not available (20.6%); and users could not afford to make copies (16.5%). The least relevant reason was the belief that the act of mutilation was an expression of hostility toward the library and/or the university (16.5%). (See Table 2)

Means to prevent mutilation/theft of library materials:

Regarding the preventive measures of protecting library materials from being mutilated or stolen, about 70% of respondents opined that posting signs of warning of punishment for mutilating library materials would be a very effective measure. Another 68.5% of respondents indicated that posting signs of the time and cost of replacement would also be very effective. About 50% of respondents

rated the policy of keeping periodicals and reference materials on reserve as effective. The policy of requiring periodicals and reference materials not to be taken from certain limited areas was conceived as effective by 47.9% of respondents. Only 38.4% of respondents thought that installing additional photocopying machines in the library would be an effective measure. (See Table 3)

IMPLICATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

As revealed from this study, the problems of book theft and mutilation of library materials at UML cannot be taken lightly as about 80% of respondents did report their experience of encountering such problems. Even though about 70% of respondents reported that they never thought about committing the crime, it is startling to find that 72.6% of them thought that it was easy to do so.

Regarding the reasons for the crime, the most prevalent ones reported were: the library materials can not be checked out; the lenient policy of penalty; the inadequacy of library security measures; and the unawareness of replacement costs. It seems that the non-circulatory materials such as reference books and periodicals are the most easily targeted items to be mutilated or stolen as they can not be checked out. Protection of library materials is in conflict with the convenience of access. However, the problems are also attributed to the library's lenient policy of penalty, inadequacy of library security, and the inadequacy of

unawareness of replacement costs. What do these findings imply?

From the public services point of view, the purpose of classifying library materials as non-circulatory is to put materials in great demand at a centralized location to ensure their availability when needed. The increase in theft or mutilation of library materials means decreasing availability of these materials, leading to more inconvenience and dissatisfaction among the patrons, thus lowering the quality of public services and defeating its purpose. It also results in adverse public relations between librarians and patrons. Intellectually speaking, this also acts as a limitation of access to information which poses a threat to knowledge pursuit and exchange. As for the administration, the problem also poses great financial consequences. More missing and damaged library materials means more monetary expenses. The costs of repair and replacement become a necessary additional expense for the library which, in turn, further strains the already belt-tight book funds for acquisition of new library materials. The eventual outcome is also a lower quality of library services.

CONCLUSION

How could we remedy this situation? Even though 97.3% of respondents favor some form of penalty, would a stricter policy of penalty solve the problems? As suggested from this study, a public awareness campaign, publicizing the extent of the problems and the financial consequences to the library, might be the best effective preventive measure to stop the crime. Exhibiting damaged materials,

posting signs of replacement costs, and conveying the message during library orientations may be worth trying. After all, educating the patrons may still be the best prevention.

NOTES

1. Griffith, J. W., "Library Thefts: a Problem That Won't Go Away," American Libraries, 9:4 (April 1978): 224-227.
2. A prominent example was Mr. Blumberg's crime of stealing more than 20,000 books and 10,000 manuscripts worth an estimated of $20 millions from university libraries across the country. See Monaghan, Peter, "How a Campus Police Sergeant Nailed a Library Thief Extraordinary," The Chronicle of Higher Education (February 27, 1991): A3.
3. Towner, Lawrence W., "An End to Innocence," American Libraries 19:3 (March 1988): 210-213.
4. Weiss, Dana, "Book Theft and Book Mutilation in a Large Urban University Library," College & Research Libraries 42:4 (July 1981): 341-347.
5. Flagg, Gordon, "Librarians Meet to Fight Book Thieves," American Libraries 14:10 (November 1983): 648-650.
6. A large of portion of the questionnaire was modeled on Terri L. Pedersen's article. See Pedersen, Terri L., "Theft and Mutilation of Library Materials," College & Research Libraries 51 (March 1990): 120-128.

Table 1: User Demographics

Classification	Number of respondents	Percentage (%)
Undergraduates		
Freshman	7	9.6
Sophomore	15	20.5
Junior	12	16.4
Senior	21	28.8
Sub-total	55	75.3
Graduates	18	24.7
Total	73	100.0

Table 2: Reasons for Mutilation & Theft of Library Materials

Suggested Reasons	1	2	3	4	5
Materials can't be checked out	13.7	8.2	8.2	32.9	37.0
Lenient penalties if caught	12.3	5.5	15.1	32.9	34.2
Inadequate security measure	12.3	12.3	13.7	21.5	40.4
Not aware of replacement costs	23.6	8.3	11.1	32.0	25.0
Don't think it is a crime	24.7	6.8	19.1	24.7	24.7
Easier to take away materials	23.3	17.8	16.4	18.5	24.0
Few frequently used materials	22.2	12.5	25.0	25.0	15.3
Prevent others' access	35.6	16.4	13.7	20.6	13.7
No time to make copies	37.0	17.8	21.9	16.4	6.9
Qualities of copies not good	36.1	20.8	20.8	12.5	9.8
Copy machines not available	32.9	20.5	26.0	13.7	6.9
Can't afford to pay copies	52.0	17.8	13.7	11.0	5.5
Hostile to the library/university	57.5	16.4	9.6	9.6	6.9

(N=73; figures in percentage; 1=irrelevant, 5=very relevant)

Table 3: Measures to Prevent Mutilation of Library Materials

Measures	1	2	3	4	5
Warnings of punishment	6.8	4.1	19.2	31.5	38.4
Signs of time & replacement cost	11.0	8.2	12.3	38.4	30.1
Keeping materials on reserve	11.1	13.9	25.0	16.7	33.3
Limited access areas	12.3	13.7	26.0	17.8	30.1
More copying machines	9.6	26.0	26.0	15.1	23.3

(N=73; figures in percentage; 1=irrelevant, 5=very relevant)

Appendix I: The Questionnaire

University of Memphis Library

We are conducting a survey to help deal with the problems of mutilation and theft of library materials. We would appreciate if you could fill out this brief questionnaire:

1. What is your classification?

   ____Freshman ____Sophomore ____Junior ____Senior
   ____Graduate student

2. You are: ____Male ____Female

3. Have missing or mutilated library materials ever inconvenienced or frustrated you?

   ____No ____Occasionally ____Often ____Very frequently

4. Have you ever thought about tearing out an article or stealing a library book or magazine?

   ____No ____Once or twice ____Occasionally ____Often

5. Have you ever thought about the fact that you and many others have to use the same materials?

   ____Yes ____No

6. How easy do you think it would be to tear out an article or steal a book or magazine without being caught?

   ____Easy ____Somewhat difficult ____Very difficult

7. If you saw someone mutilating or stealing library materials, what would you do?

   ____Nothing ____Ask them to stop ____Report it

8. What should be the penalty for those caught mutilating or stealing library materials?

   ____None ____Fine ____More severe

9. The following are some suggested reasons for mutilation and theft of library materials. Please circle the number that best expresses your opinion concerning the relevance of each reason (1=irrelevant, unrelated; 5=very relevant).

Cannot afford to make copies.	1 2 3 4 5
Copying machines are not available.	1 2 3 4 5
No time to make copies.	1 2 3 4 5
Quality of copies is not good enough for photographs, color charts, etc.	1 2 3 4 5
Easier to take the article or book than to copy it.	1 2 3 4 5
Not enough copies of frequently used materials.	1 2 3 4 5
Materials can not be checked out.	1 2 3 4 5
Lack of awareness of replacement costs.	1 2 3 4 5
Prevent others' access to the information.	1 2 3 4 5
Do not believe that it is a crime or immoral to steal or mutilate library materials.	1 2 3 4 5
Inadequate library security measures.	1 2 3 4 5
Believe that penalties would be lenient if caught.	1 2 3 4 5
Express hostility toward library and/or university.	1 2 3 4 5

10. How effective do you think the following measures would be in preventing or protecting against mutilation or theft of library materials? (1=not effective, 5=very effective)

Install additional copying machines.	1 2 3 4 5
Post signs of warning and punishment for doing so.	1 2 3 4 5
Post signs of time and cost of replacement.	1 2 3 4 5
Keep periodicals and reference materials on reserve so that they have to be checked out.	1 2 3 4 5
Require that periodicals and reference materials not to be taken from certain limited areas.	1 2 3 4 5

11. Please write any other comments concerning the problems of theft and mutilation of library materials in the space below.

_____

_____

*** THE END & THANK YOU ***

Appendix II: Students' Comments

"You need to strike a balance between cost/inconvenience of (trying to) controlling everything and the cost/inconvenience of theft and mutilation."

"I haven't encountered that problem."

"Put the bums in jail and throw away the key!"

"Some of students might forget to put books or articles back sometimes--This is a case."

"May be good to post signs and put materials on reserve, but too much inconvenience."

"Put materials on reserve may be effective but inconvenient."

"The continuous placement of an observant individual(s) at the door may be helpful in the deterring of people from going around the detectors."

"Need better and higher moral standards in society."

"If caught abusing or stealing library property, cease their use of the library, it is a privilege not a favor."

"A system-wide use of microfiche in the periodicals section would curtail vandalism. All periodicals should be kept bound and put at a reserve desk so that they can be borrowed for a limited time for pleasure reading.

"I believe that if the library would have more security and protection of the students and books, the theft and mutilation would be minimized."